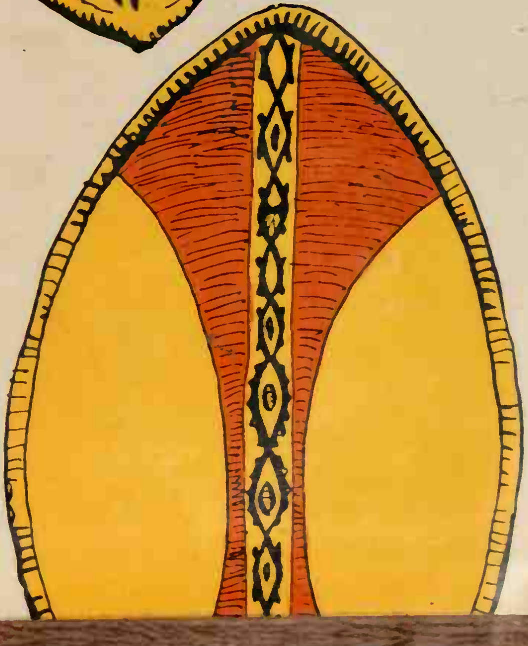
Arms and Armor in Africa

Helmut Nickel



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Arms and Armor in Africa

The oldest surviving tools and weapons in the world, pebbles chipped into blades, have been found in Africa. Later, the stone-age men of Africa used the same kinds of weapons and tools that stone-age men used everywhere: primarily the hand axe, which served for hacking, slashing, and cutting, and still later, flaked flint blades and arrowheads. However, a special type of hand axe, the cleaver, has been found in Africa and nowhere else.

But little is known about the life, the weapons, or the defenses of the people of Africa between the end of the stone age and quite recent times. Few clues to such history remain because the Africans passed from the stone age directly into the iron age, missing the bronze age entirely. Iron decays easily as does the wood and other organic materials the early Africans used for their buildings and for their art and weapons.

Therefore, the African arms and armor that we know about are either very ancient or quite modern. The text, photographs, and drawings presented here show the things that have been gathered from the various natural geographic zones of the huge continent.

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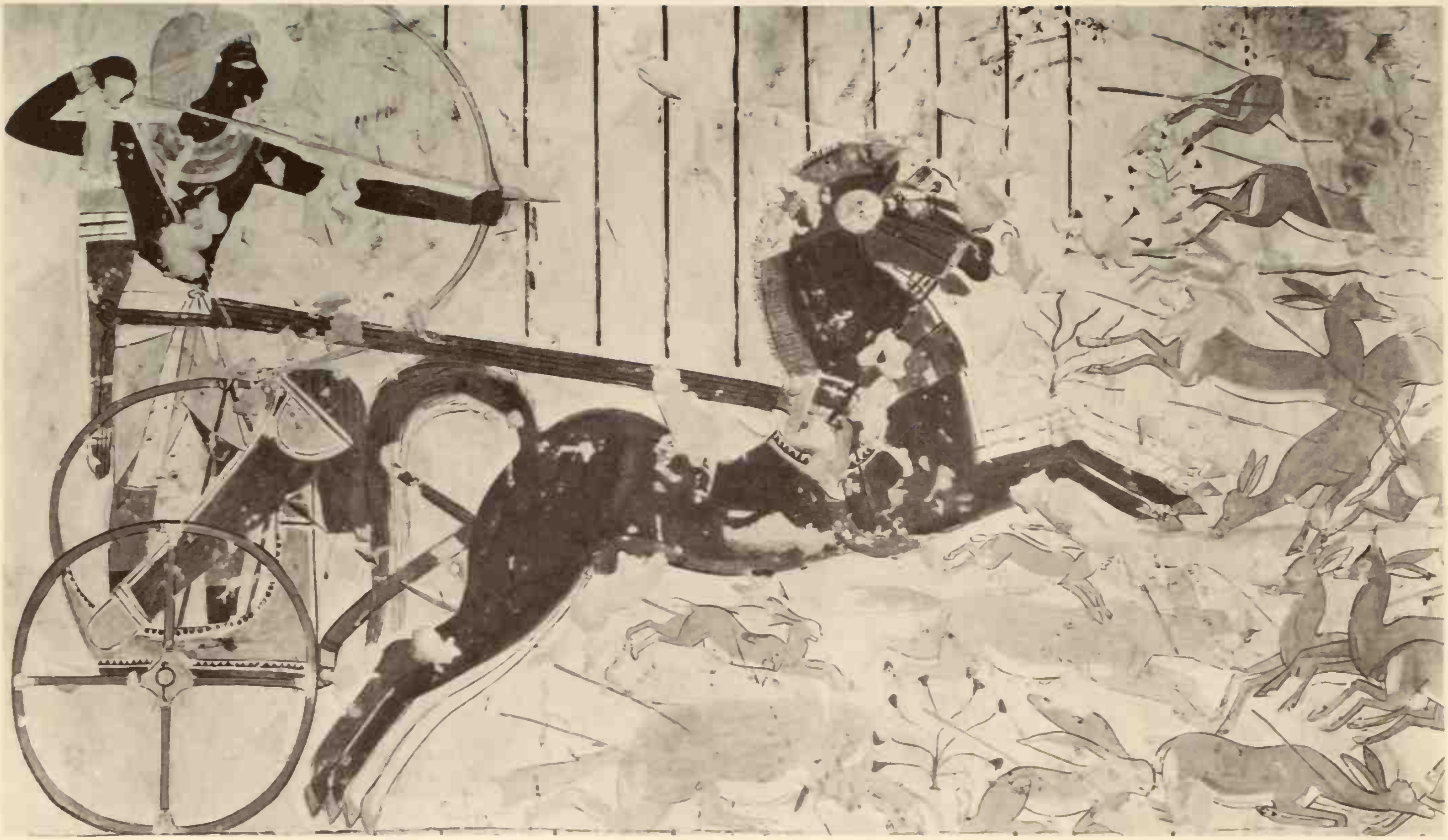
Arms and Armor in Africa



EGYPTIAN HUNTING CHARIOT

Arms and Armor in Africa

Helmut Nickel

Curator of Arms and Armor for the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Atheneum 1971 New York

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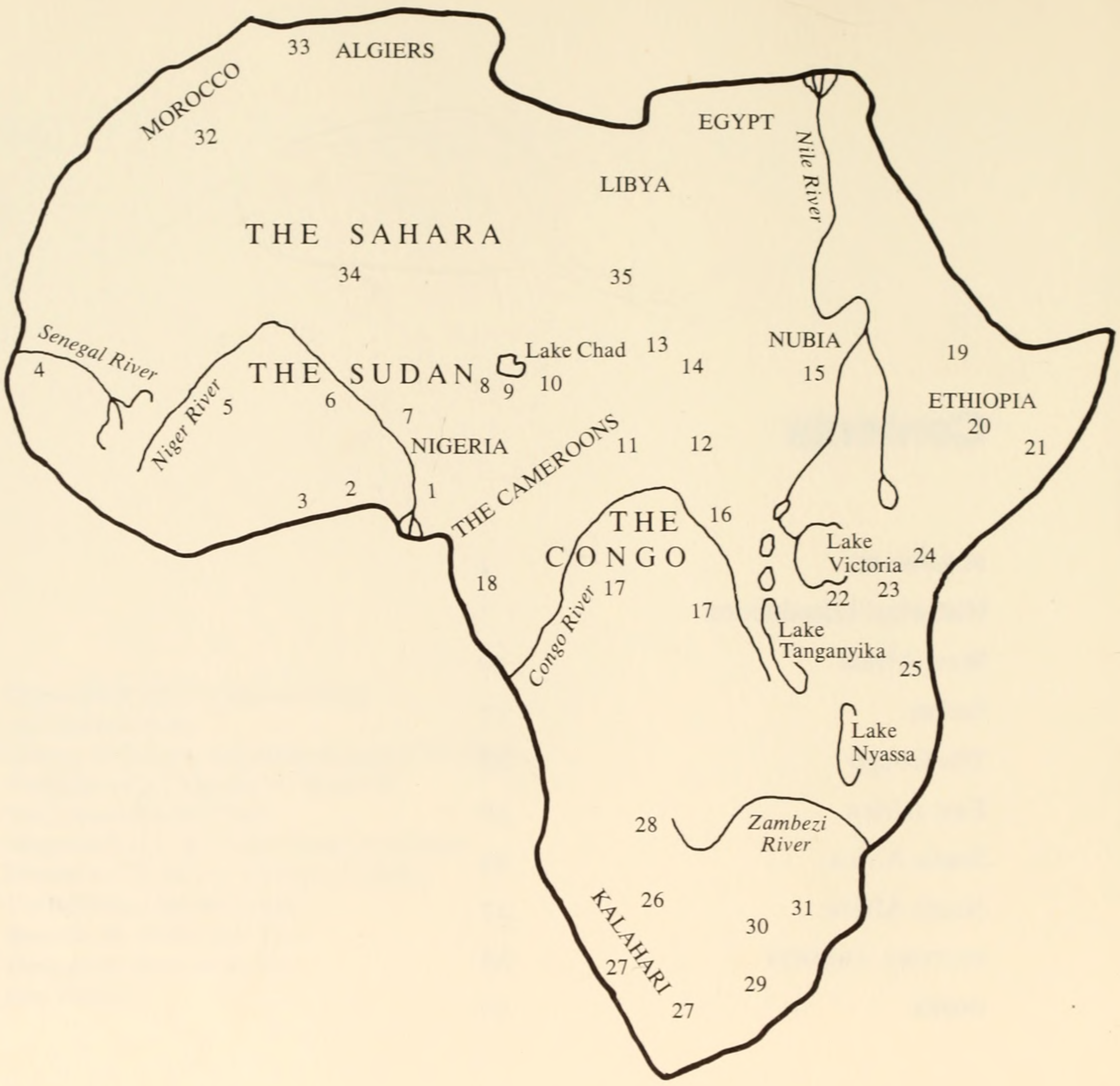
Contents

FOREWORD	1
Historical Introduction	3
West Africa	10
Sudan	17
The Congo	28
East Africa	36
South Africa	43
North Africa	47
PICTURE CREDITS	55
INDEX	57

1 BINI (BENIN)
2 DAHOMEY
3 ASHANTI
4 SENEGALESE
5 MANDINGO
6 MOSSI
7 HAUSSA
8 BORNU
9 BAGHIRMI
10 KANEM
11 MANGBETU
12 AZANDE
13 DINKA
14 SHULI
15 BAGGARA
16 PYGMIES
17 FOREST TRIBES
18 FANG
19 AMHARS
20 GALLAS
21 SOMALIS
22 WATUSI
23 MASAI
24 KIKUYU
25 SWAHILI
26 BUSHMEN
27 HOTTENTOTS
28 HEREROS
29 ZULU
30 BECHUANA (BOTSWANA)
31 BASUTOS
32 BERBER
33 KABYLES
34 TUAREGH
35 TIBBU



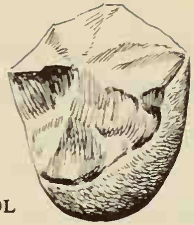
Foreword

This book was written to point out the amazing variety and richness of an important part of Africa's cultural heritage and to preserve the knowledge of it, because it is disappearing fast in today's rapidly changing world.

Most of the information about arms and armor in Africa that you will find here naturally refers to earlier times, because the modern states of Africa have, of course, modern armies for their defense. However, in some places the ancient traditions are strong enough to have preserved age-old forms to the present day.

SAHARA ROCK PAINTING

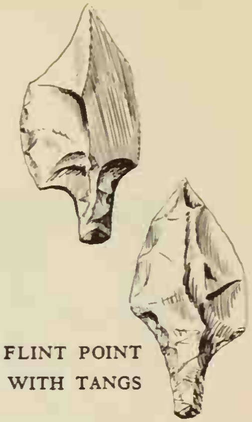
Historical Introduction



PEBBLE TOOL

HAND AXE

CLEAVER



FLINT POINT
WITH TANGS

Africa is a very old continent in terms of human history. It is the place where Man first became Man. In South Africa archaeologists have discovered remains of beings that represent transitional stages in the development of the species from apes to men. Man is said to be the tool-using animal, and the oldest surviving tools and weapons—pebbles chipped into blades—have also been found in Africa.

Early Stone Age men used the hand axe, a hefty blade of a roughly almond shape. It was a universal tool that could be used for hacking, slashing, and cutting. A special type of hand axe, the cleaver, seems to have been used in Africa and nowhere else. Later, during the Ice Age, when the level of the Mediterranean Sea was much lower than now and the Strait of Gibraltar was a land bridge, Neanderthal men came down from Europe and introduced other forms of stone blades that were soon accepted by the local people, and developed further. The African forms of these blades, which were of flaked flint, had a distinctive tang for attachment to a shaft or handle.

Hunters and warriors of the Late Stone Age, about seven or eight thousand years ago, not only left us many beautifully chipped spear heads and arrow points, but also numerous cave paintings and rock engravings representing archers and spearmen hunting and fighting. Strangely enough, most of these works of art are to be found in what is now the Sahara; evidently this terrible desert was a fruitful country teeming with game in those days.

SAHARA ROCK PAINTING

It was still the Stone Age when the first army in history came into being. This was in Africa, too—in Egypt—where one of the world's oldest civilizations originated at the banks of the Nile. The Egyptian army of the Old Kingdom—3000 B.C.—consisted of archers (the Egyptians were such famous bowmen that in several ancient languages "archer" and "Egyptian" were the same word) and spearmen. Their arrows and spears were tipped with flint, and their maces consisted of stone heads on wooden handles; officers' mace heads were fashioned from marble in many colors and beautifully polished. There was almost no armor; the only protective arms were huge shields of ox hide. The soldiers marched into battle following standards, usually figures of sacred animals mounted on tall poles; at first these were the symbols of the *nomes* (provinces) from which the men were levied; later, with increasingly thorough organization, real regimental standards came into use.

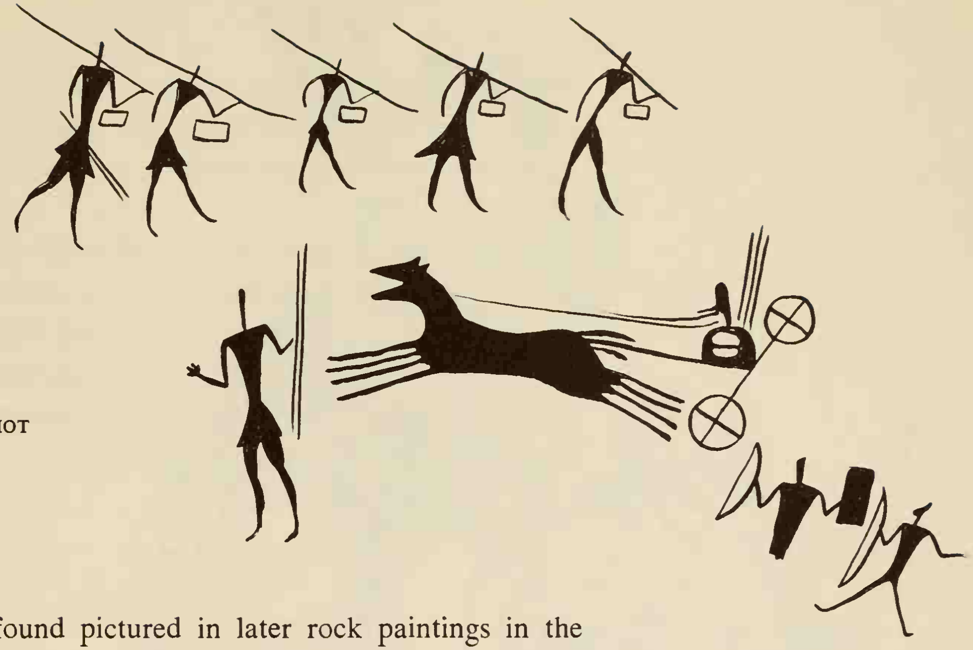
The beginnings of metal-working brought forth improved weapons—bronze spear heads, broad-bladed battle-axes, keen daggers, and (most important) swords. About 1700 B.C. invaders from the North, the Hyksos, swept into Egypt riding horse-drawn chariots. The Egyptians quickly adopted the new method of fighting and became masters themselves of charioteering. Two horses were yoked to the wagon tongue, and the chariot body was hung with quivers for javelins and arrows. The crew consisted of an unarmed driver and a fighting man.

Because of the difficulty of working with an army made up of drafted peasants who for long periods of the year were urgently needed for work in their fields, hired professional soldiers gradually became the mainstay of the army. The traditional foreign mercenaries of Egypt were the Nubians, black warriors from the lands at the Upper Nile.

BLADES OF EGYPTIAN BATTLE AXES,

SWORD OF PHARAOH TAKELOT

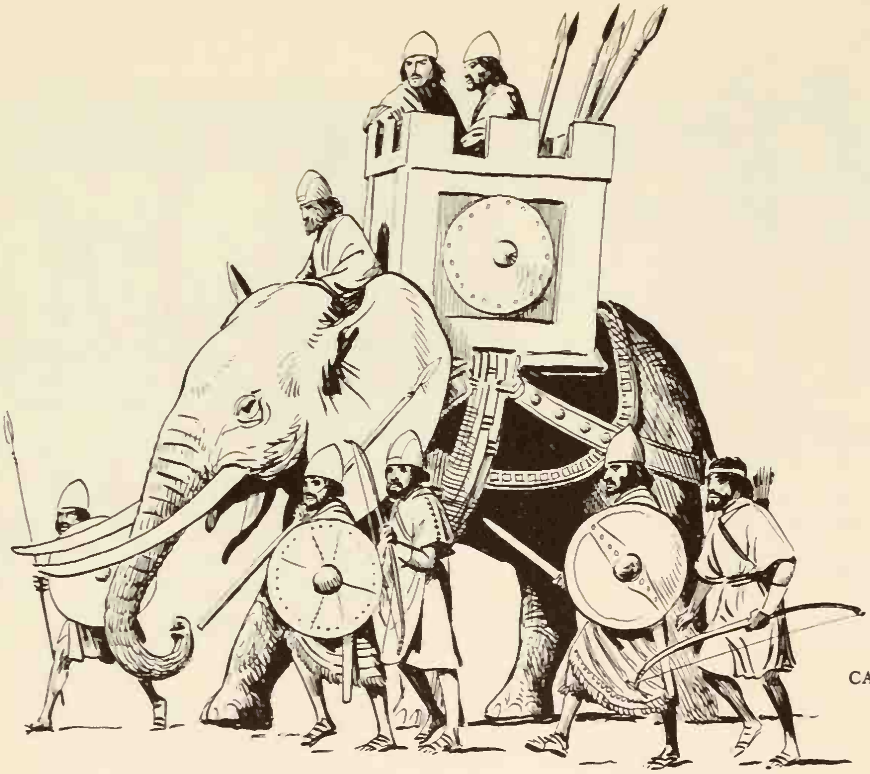
TUTANKHAMEN FIGHTS NUBIANS; PAINTING ON BOX FROM TOMB



SAHARA ROCK PAINTING WITH CHARIOT

Charioteers are also to be found pictured in later rock paintings in the Sahara; probably the people represented were ancestors of tribes who in historical times were known as the Garamantes, and who in turn might have been the ancestors of today's Tuaregh.

In the third century B.C. North Africa was dominated by the mighty city-state, Carthage. The Carthaginians were Phoenicians who came originally from what is now Lebanon. As Phoenicians, they were great seafarers and had a splendid navy of swift, many-oared galleys. However, they are best known for their long fight against the Romans—the Punic Wars—and their great general Hannibal. Hannibal's army—with which he crossed the Alps and carried the war to the very gates of Rome, winning such spectacular victories as the Battle of Cannae (216 B.C.)—included large numbers of African tribesmen as mercenaries, among them the renowned Numidian cavalry. Another special African feature of this army was, of course, the famous war elephants.



CARTHAGINIAN WAR ELEPHANT

Much later, after the downfall of the Roman Empire, one of the barbarian tribes from the North, the Vandals, established itself on the shore of Africa. They were driven out by the Byzantines, who—in the seventh century A.D.—were in their turn overrun by Arabs pouring into Africa fired with burning zeal for their newly founded religion, Islam. From Morocco, at the western end of Africa, they crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and conquered Spain (711 A.D.). During the Middle Ages they held the coast firmly against all others, opposing the crusaders and sending out swarms of pirate ships to harass the Christian countries around the Mediterranean Sea. The Moslem sultans of

Egypt during the thirteenth century took to staffing their guard regiments with slaves imported from Turkey and Persia. These slave warriors, the Mamelukes, grew more and more powerful, until one of them overthrew the sultan and made himself ruler of Egypt.

For more than 250 years these Mameluke sultans reigned over Egypt and the neighboring countries, supported by a tough warrior-elite, which was constantly built up with newly-bought slaves. Finally, in 1517 A.D., the Turks invaded Egypt, overthrew the Mameluke empire, and held the northern parts of Africa until the nineteenth century, taking up the old tradition of piracy against the European countries on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea.

MAMELUKE WARRIOR

West Africa

While we are quite well informed about the history of Northern Africa, we know little more than a bare outline of what happened in the parts of Africa south of the Sahara from the end of the Stone Age until only a few hundred years ago. When the Sahara became a desert, it cut off the greater part of the continent from the view and knowledge of Europe for several thousands of years. Today, although archaeologists can discover much about long-forgotten civilizations in many parts of the world, very little can be found in Africa because durable materials, such as stone, were seldom used in art or architecture. The wood and clay that were used have disintegrated in the tropical climate. As far as weapons are concerned, there is a gap in our knowledge for much the same reason. After the Stone Age, the Africans did not go through a Bronze Age as the European and Asian cultures did. Instead they went directly into the Iron Age, and iron corrodes in a relatively short time, leaving nothing behind for the archaeologists to find.

One of the few exceptions is the ancient kingdom of Benin at the mouth of the Niger River. It was one of the earliest places where Europeans met black Africans on their own ground. The Portuguese discoverers of the fifteenth century on their way to India, feeling their way along the African coastline, were very much impressed with the splendor of the king's palace in Benin. They found it to be "covered with brass plates depicting the victories and warlike deeds of the king." Though the palace has vanished, many of the brass

KING OF BENIN WITH WARRIORS; BRASS PLAQUE

plaques have come down to us and show us how the warriors of Benin looked.

The universal protective weapon of the Benin warrior was a big shield. Shaped very much like that of the ancient Egyptians, it had a curved top and was straight at the bottom; it was intended to be set on the ground to cover a man when kneeling down. Besides serving in battle, these shields were also used in stately parades to give shade for the king, literally shielding him from the fierce African sun, as is shown in this magnificently molded relief plaque.

BENIN WARRIOR WITH PONCHO ARMOR OF LEOPARD SKIN AND HELMET OF CROCODILE SKIN

PORTUGUESE WITH GUN AND AFRICAN PONCHO ARMOR

Chieftains and distinguished warriors wore helmets of padded basketwork or of hard crocodile skin; for body armor they had quilted ponchos covered with leopard skins, strong enough to stop an arrow or a spear thrust. The Portuguese discoverers seem to have found these more practical in the hot climate than their European steel breastplates.

Spears with barbed heads, bows and arrows were used for hunting as well as for fighting; short swords were the weapons used for hand-to-hand fighting. The swords were worn in ornate scabbards, hanging from decorated shoulder belts. A special type of sword having a particularly wide blade with double-curved edges was an insignia of authority for high chiefs.

BENIN WARRIOR WITH CEREMONIAL SWORD;
BRASS PLAQUE

DAHOMEY AMAZONS

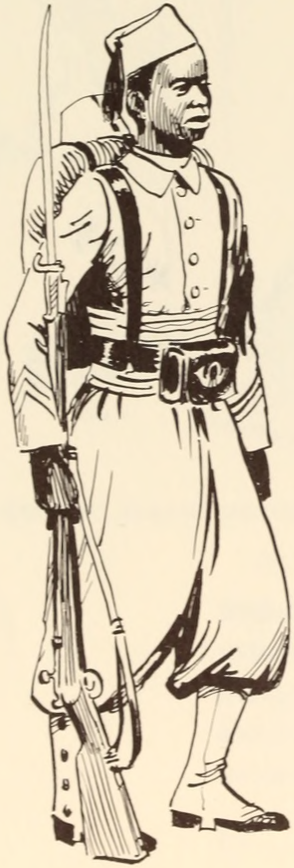
On the coast further to the west was the great warrior kingdom of Dahomey. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the Dahomeans gradually conquered one tribe after another, and over the years they gradually changed their armaments from arrows to guns. A special feature of the invincible Dahomean army was the fact that the elite regiments consisted of female warriors. These Amazons were regarded as wives of the king, but they never-

FORTIFIED VILLAGE, TAMBERMA TRIBE

theless went to war and were more feared in battle than the men.

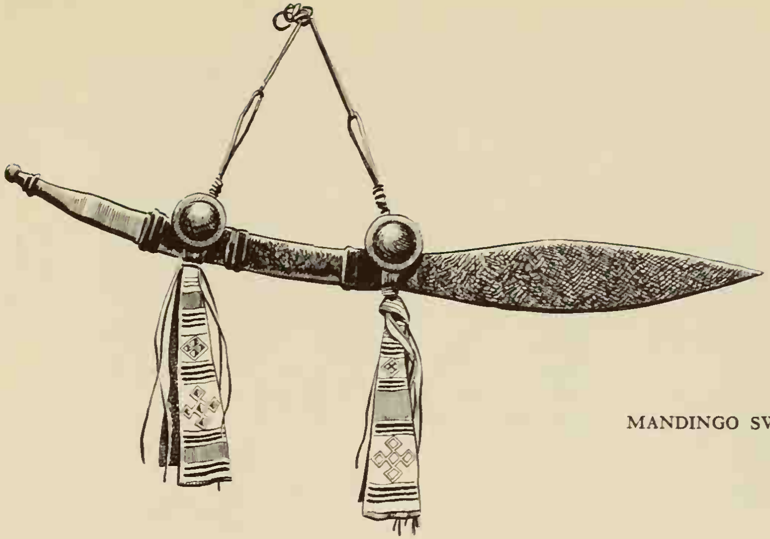
The captives taken in these wars were mostly sold as slaves to slave traders, who paid in powder and guns in order to encourage more conquests. Smaller tribes took to fortifying their villages into veritable castles as defense against slave raids. Ironically, it was only when the Europeans established themselves in Africa as colonial powers that slavery and intertribal warfare came to an

end. Some tribes, such as the Ashanti, fought fiercely for their freedom. Others, however—such as the men from Senegal of whom the discoverer Cadamosto said in 1457, "They would rather die than take a step backwards."—eventually displayed their natural virtues of courage and bravery in the armies of the European powers—often as spectacularly colorful troops, such as the famous Tirailleurs de Senegal of the French or the West African Frontier Force of the British—and fought gallantly on many battlefields.



TIRAILLEUR DE SENEGAL

Sudan

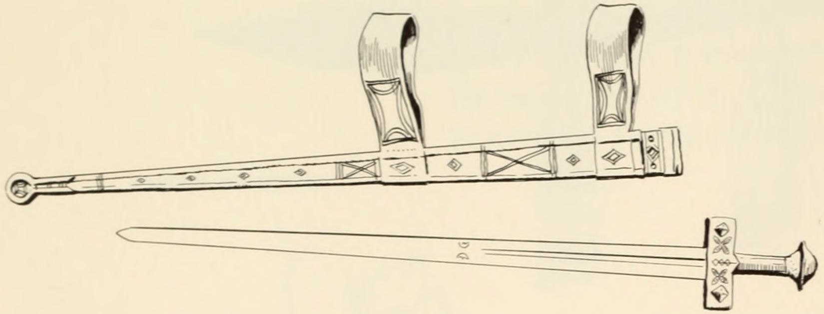


MANDINGO SWORD

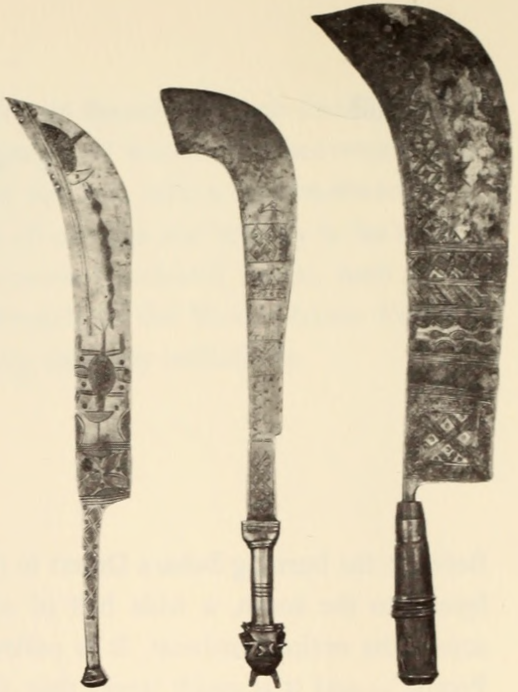
Between the burning Sahara Desert to the north and the steaming tropical rain forests to the south, a wide belt of savannahs and dry grasslands stretches across the entire continent. It is called the Sudan—"the Land of the Black People"—and it is much larger than the modern country of the same name. It can be subdivided into three major sections: Western, Central, and Eastern.

Through the Western part of the Sudan runs the river Niger (this too means "the Black One"), crossing and recrossing the grassland belt in a wide sweeping curve before it turns south and empties into the Gulf of Guinea in the land of the Benin. Up at the headwaters of the Niger, powerful kingdoms flourished during the period that corresponded to the Middle Ages in Europe—gold-rich Ghana, Soso, and great Melli. The rulers of Melli, who conquered Soso, were Moslems, and the cultural influence from Islamic countries has been strong in the Sudan ever since.

The characteristic weapon for most Sudanese tribes was the sword, though other arms, such as lances, clubs, and bows, were, of course, used, too. The Nigerian Mandingo carried a curved sword in an elaborately tooled leather scabbard worn over one shoulder on a tasseled baldric of braided thongs, and



MOSSI SWORD



BRASS-BLADED KNIVES FROM ILESHA, SOUTH NIGERIA

fastened with two large leather buttons. The Mossi and the Haussa sported straight longswords with cruciform hilts, mounted in leather and brass; their blades were often of medieval European manufacture. Especially prized were old Spanish blades that showed the crescent mark of Toledo; even on many blades made by Haussa smiths these marks were carefully copied.

The Haussa claim to have been originally a tribe of smiths. This is both interesting and peculiar, because to most Sudanese, smiths are nearly outcasts. Though they are much needed as craftsmen, they are shunned out of a fear of their supposed magic skills that gave their products the power to kill. Besides swords the Haussa had bracelet-daggers worn in pairs on their forearms under their voluminous robes.

HAUSSA WITH BRACELET DAGGERS

LOCAL NIGERIAN CHIEF WITH SWORD

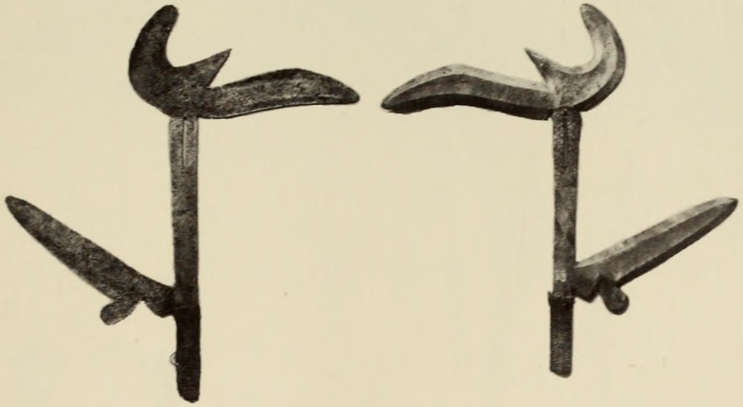
In the Central Sudan, towards Lake Chad, there still live two warrior tribes, the Bornu and Baghirmi. The warriors of these two nations retained body armor longer than any other people. The armies of both the Bornu and Baghirmi consisted largely of armored horsemen. The Bornu wore padded helmet caps, sometimes iron helmets, and quilted jackets under long mail shirts. Their horses had iron chanfrons.

The Baghirmi wore more elaborate helmets of an inverted bucket shape, reinforced with cross straps and decorated with plumes. Their armor was a quilted jacket for the man, and chanfrons and long hanging trappings for the horse. These trappings were often made as a patchwork of two or more colors, and sometimes they had slits on either side of the saddle where the rider could stick his unprotected legs under the quilted cover. The appearance of these caparisoned horsemen with their cruciform swords led European explorers to believe that they might be descendants of Crusaders who had strayed off, but actually the armor represented that worn by the Crusaders' opponents, the Saracens. Many of the Sudanese mail shirts were actually of medieval Arabian make.

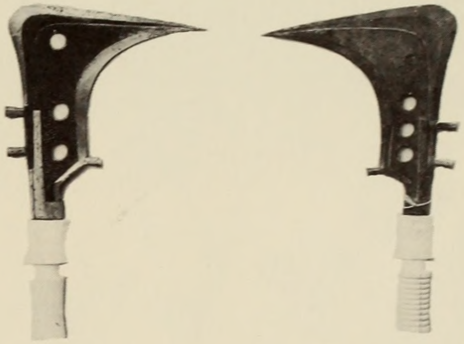
WARRIORS OF BORNU

BAGHIRMI HORSEMEN

SPEAR AND SHIELD CARRYING WARRIORS OF MODERN CHAD

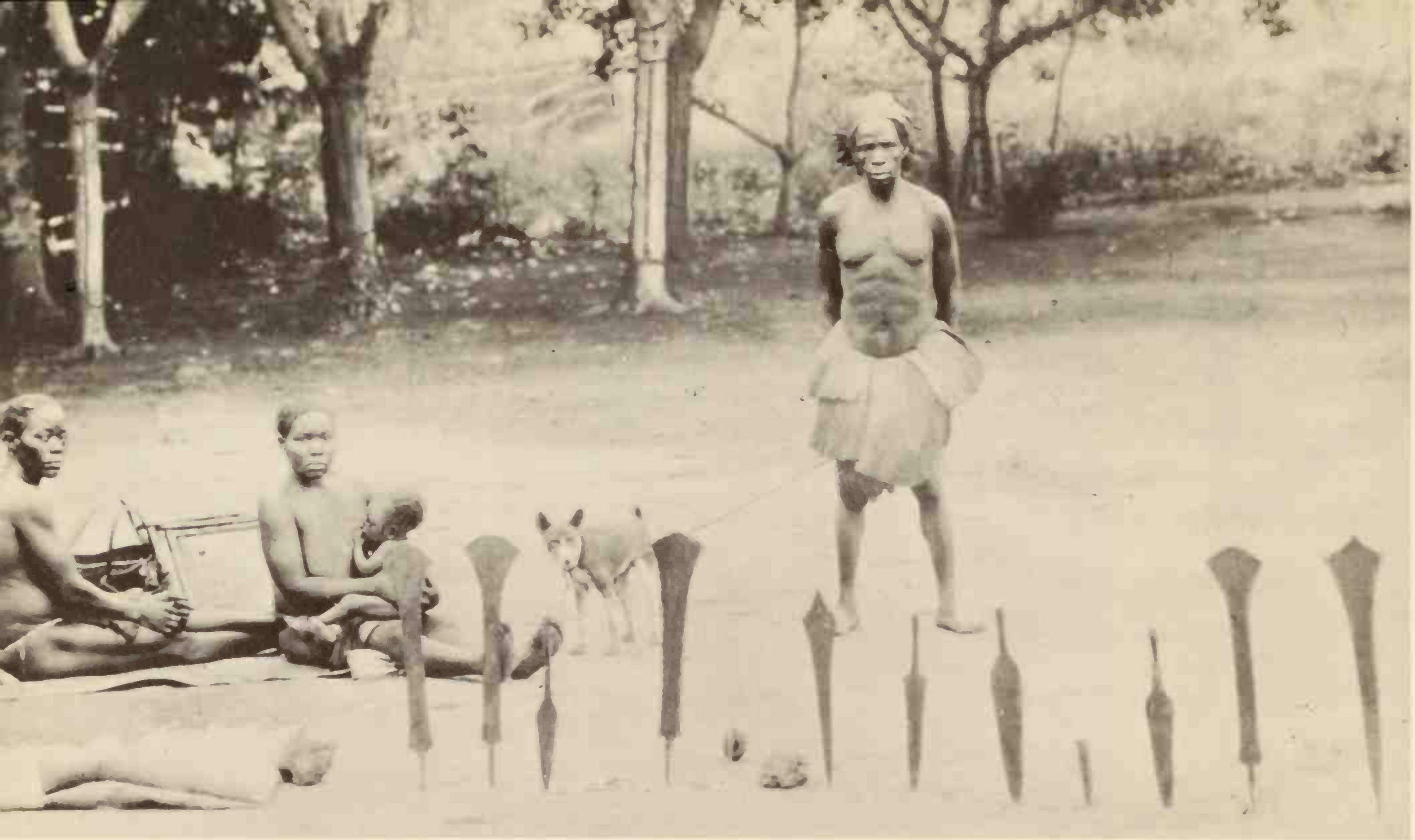


THROWING IRONS FROM THE SUDAN



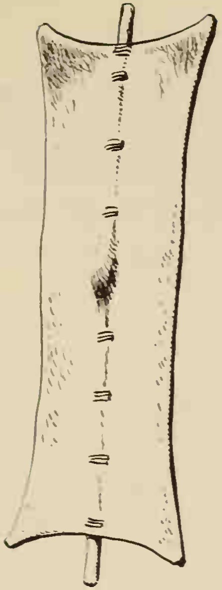
IVORY HANDLED KNIVES OF THE SUDAN

In spite of the existence of modern armies, traditional weapons are still a part of present-day Africa, as shown by these tribal warriors with spears, padded helmet caps, and breastplates, posing in front of a truck of the army of Chad. Note the hide shields that recall those of the ancient Egyptians. East of the Bornu and Baghirmi are tribes of farmers, among them the Mangbetu and the Azande. The Mangbetu use a strangely shaped knife that has a remarkable resemblance to the ancient Egyptian *khopsht,* though it is more likely related to the often bizarre forms of throwing irons used in this region. These throwing irons are the old equivalent of a hand grenade. Their sharp spikes can inflict terrible wounds on practically naked enemy bodies.



AZANDE GROOM PAYING HIS BRIDE-MONEY

Since iron is considered to be a very valuable material because of its usefulness in making tools and weapons, it is used as money. Oversize blades, often in fanciful forms, are the "coins" with which the Azande groom pays his bride-money to his father-in-law. Incidentally, the Azande were once very much feared in war by their neighbors. They were cannibals (they are also known by the name Niam-Niam, which means "eaters") and had the unnerving custom of attacking with the battle-cry, "Meat! Meat!"



SHIELD OF SHULI

FIGHTING CLUB AND PARRYING SHIELD OF DINKA AND SHILLUK

DINKA WARRIORS

In the East Sudan most tribes are herders. Since many of them tried to increase their own herds by raids on their neighbors' cattle supplies, there was much intertribal strife. The weapons were mainly spears and elephant or hippopotamus hide shields. The shields of the Dinka tribe were oval in outline and reinforced by a staff threaded through loops cut into the hide. The staff served as a handgrip, too. The hide was formed into a central shield boss to accommodate the fist. The Schuli had shields of a more rectangular form; and the Shilluk and Nuer both had shields that could serve as clubs. Here the reinforcing staff was actually a thick log with a cutout for the grip; the skin cover of ox hide was applied tightly in order to keep the wood from splitting when parrying and delivering the blows of this strange shield-club. Wooden clubs were the only weapons permitted in fights between clans that considered themselves each others' kin. Use of spears would be an act of war, and was reserved for unrelated enemies.

FOLLOWERS OF THE MAHDI

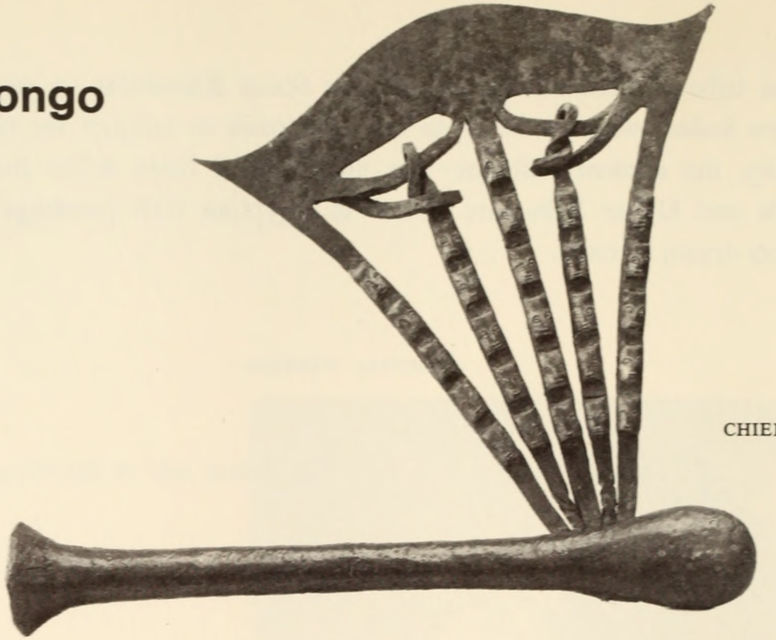
The tribes clustered around the Upper Nile were great fighters and had few equals in Africa. Their best known wars occurred during the Mahdi uprisings against the British and Egyptians in the late nineteenth century; their long swords won victory after victory for years. They were defeated only by modern rifles and Maxim guns. The better armed chiefs and emirs wore mail shirts over quilted, long-skirted coats, and rounded helmets with nasals and quilted neck covers that fell to their shoulders. However, the rifle bullets pierced and shattered the mail links and caused particularly heavy wounds. The common warrior had no body armor at all and was protected only by his circular shield of hippo hide. The sword of these Nilotic tribesmen was long, straight, and had a cruciform hilt similar to that of the Haussa. Again, many of the blades were of medieval European origin.

One tribe of herders, the Baggara in South Khordofan, a region in the Eastern Sudan, went so far as to use their oxen as animals for riding. Incidentally, the ancient Nubians—the ancestors of these tribes living at the Middle and Upper Nile—are shown in Egyptian wall paintings as having chariots drawn by oxen.

SUDANESE WARRIOR

BAGGARA TRIBESMAN MOUNTED ON RIDING OX

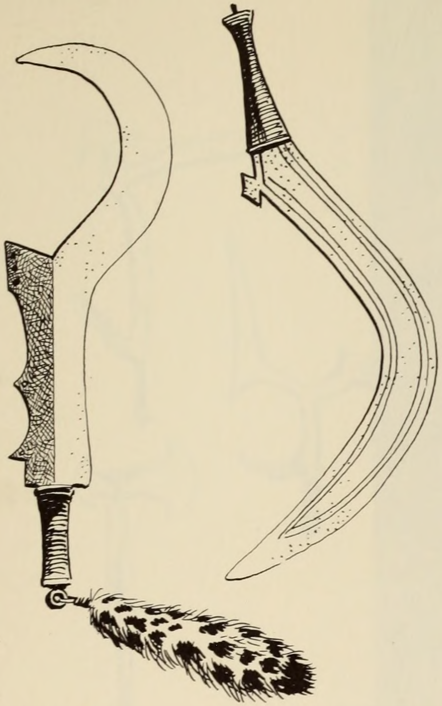
The Congo



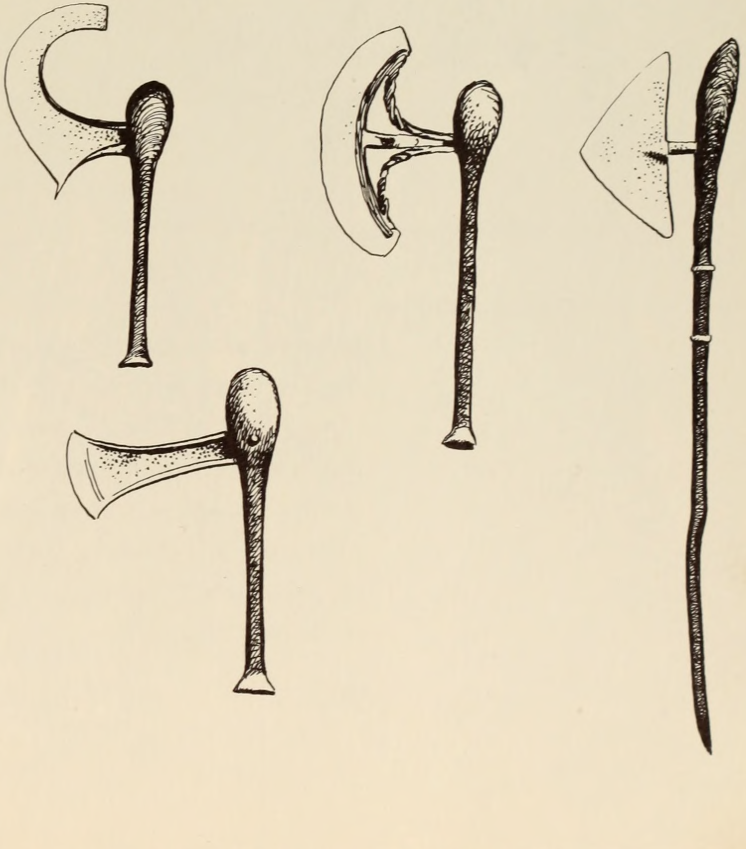
CHIEFTAIN'S AXE

South of the grasslands of the Sudan are the jungles of the Congo basin. When the Portuguese arrived in the fifteenth century, they found a mighty empire at the mouth of a great river. They called the country and the river itself, Congo, after the title of the ruler—*Makongo*.

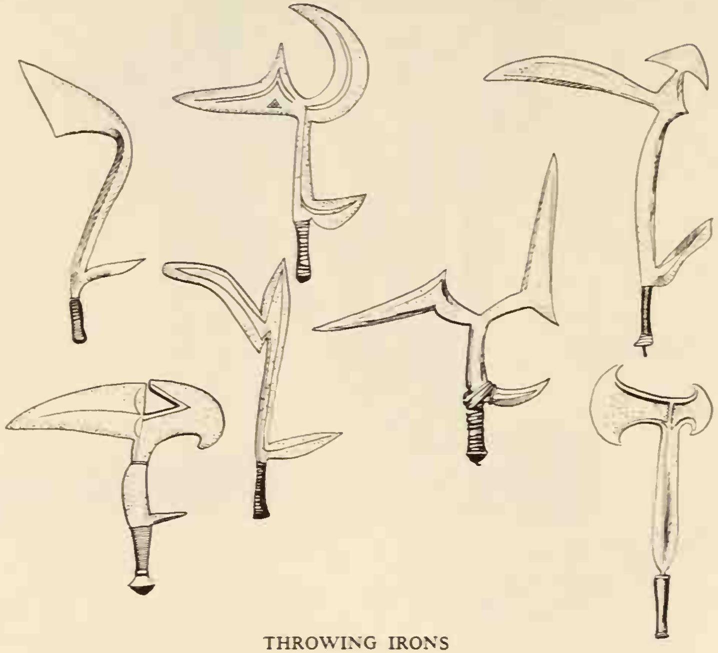
Throughout the forest are scattered many villages, standing in small clearings, and many different tribes. Though the people all belong to the same language family—Bantu—and share a rather uniform culture—forest farming—the tribes were often feuding with each other. Their weapons were spears and, as is natural for forest dwellers, axes. Especially decorated axes were insignia of rank for chieftains. The construction of these axes was peculiar, because the blades did not have an eye like our axes (where the shaft can be inserted) but had a tang that was pushed through a knob at the end of the shaft. Tribes that lived in more open parts used throwing irons, some-



AXES AND SWORDS



WARRIOR WITH BASKETWORK SHIELD



THROWING IRONS

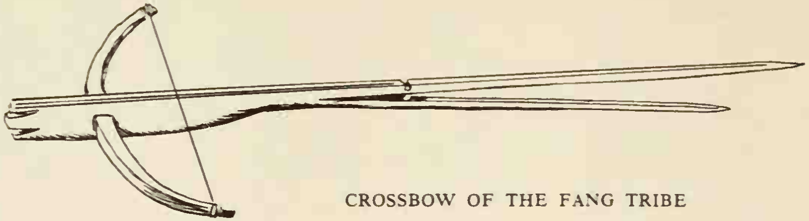
times of extraordinarily complicated form with sharp spikes and edges sticking out in all directions, in order that they might inflict wounds regardless of how they hit. Shields, very necessary against these missiles, were made of tough basketwork in colorful patterns. Short machete-like swords were weapons for parade as well as for combat. They, too, seem to have been modeled after throwing irons, because they often display bizarre shapes. Oversize blades of spear heads, knives, and throwing irons were, and in some places still are, traded as currency.

KNIVES AND SWORDS WITH IVORY HANDLES

PYGMY WITH BOW AND ARROW

Beyond the narrow confines of the island-like village clearings in the endless forest, roam the Pygmies. Being hunters, they depend for their livelihood on their weapons, mainly bows and arrows. The arrows were once tipped with hardwood or bone points. Through barter with the neighboring villagers, they now have acquired iron arrowheads. The arrows are poisoned to make doubly sure of their effectiveness (though Pygmies are excellent marksmen), and the "feathering" of the arrows normally consists of a stiff leaf fitted into the split end of the shaft. Spears are apparently not original Pygmy weapons—they received them from their neighbors in the villages. These spears make the greatest dream of the little hunters possible, to slay an elephant. The killing of an elephant is not only important for the huge meat supply it provides, food for the entire band for days, but also for the sheer glory of the deed. The tiny hunter stalks the giant prey, slips under it, and jabs his spear into the animal's belly. Though the blade is poisoned, it takes all the woodman's skill to survive the rage of the maddened beast until it collapses. Besides hunting by archery or with spears, some Pygmies have developed a system of drives in which game is caught in long nets strung out in a wide semicircle through

PYGMY WARRIOR WITH SPEAR AND HUNTING NET



CROSSBOW OF THE FANG TRIBE

the forest. All Pygmies are extremely clever in the use of ingeniously invented traps (pitfalls as well as rope-triggered self-shooting affairs) that they plant on the trails of their game animals.

The village farmers, who often had running feuds with their neighboring villages, usually organized the Pygmies dwelling next to them as auxiliaries for their battles. Thanks to their skilled woodcraft, the Pygmies served excellently (on either side) as scouts and sniping archers.

Though the farming tribes believed more in hand-thrown missiles—such as spears and throwing irons—than in shafts propelled from bows, there is one very interesting and significant exception. The Fang, on the coast of Gabon, have a crossbow of peculiar construction. Its stock is split from side to side for about half its length. In the upper half, behind the groove for the arrow, is carved a deep notch that holds the string when the bow is spanned. This notch is on top of a hole drilled through the split, and the lower part carries a peg that fits exactly into this hole. In spanning the crossbow, the archer wedges his thumb into the cleft of the stock to depress the peg and make the notch free to receive the string. In firing he jerks out his thumb, the cleft snaps shut, and the peg moves up and drives the string out of the notch. This releases the arrow. It is certain that this crossbow is an adaption of the medieval crossbow that the Portuguese discoverers brought with them.

BOW STAND OF LUBO TRIBE

CHIEFTAIN OF THE LOKELE TRIBE
WITH PARADE SPEAR AND SWORD

CONGO TRIBESMAN
DRESSED FOR HUNTER'S DANCE

FANG WARRIOR WITH CROSSBOW

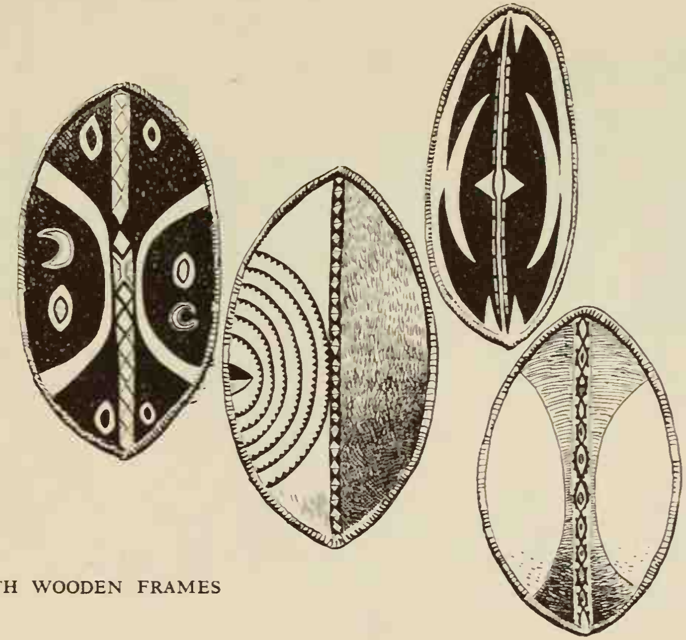
East Africa

EAST AFRICAN GALLA WARRIORS

AMHAR WARRIOR

To the east of the Sudan and the Congo basin is an assortment of nations and tribes as diversified as the region itself; for, jagged mountain ranges, pathless swamps, dry steppes, and huge lakes alternate in a long stretch along the shore of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

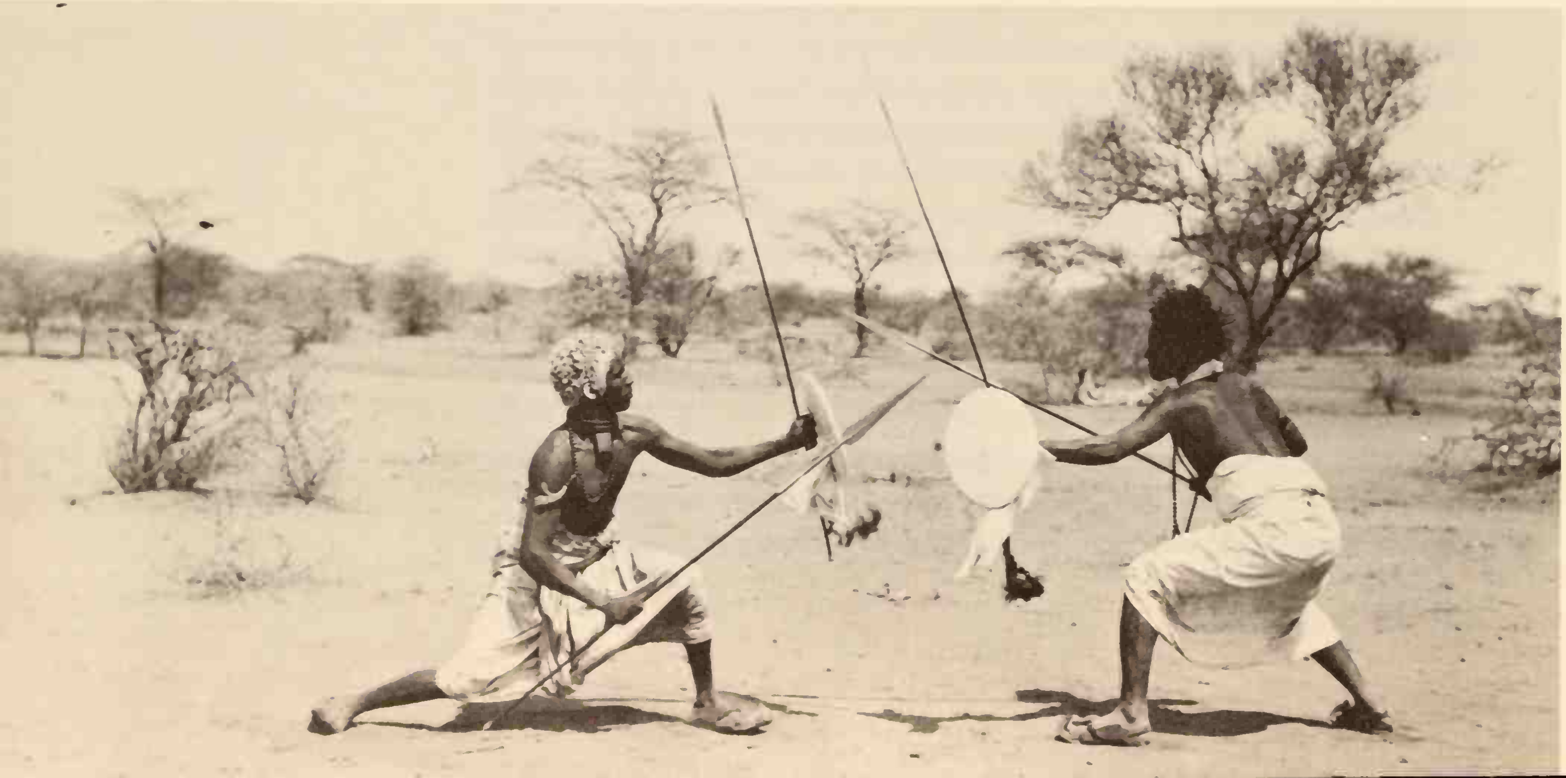
The northernmost part is mountainous Ethiopia. The two major ethnic and religious groups there are the Amhars and the Gallas. The Amhars are Christians and have been since earliest times. (Rumors about their Christian kingdom in the midst of far-off Africa were the origin of the medieval myth of the Empire of Prester John.) Throughout the centuries they have fought long wars with their heathen and Moslem neighbors. Sometimes they were helped by Europeans; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, the king of Portugal answered a call for assistance from the Negus, the Amhar king, as a fellow Christian monarch. But sometimes these people had to fight Europeans as well, notably the Italians in 1896 and then again in 1935.



EAST AFRICAN SHIELDS; HIDE WITH WOODEN FRAMES

Through their many contacts with Europeans the Ethiopians were well acquainted with firearms, but they never fully abandoned their traditional weapons: spear, shield, and sword. The shield they used was circular, of buffalo hide, and was strongly domed in its center in order to afford a more glancing surface to deflect sword cuts and missiles. Its face was often covered with brilliantly colored velvet and spangled with silver or brass mountings. The sword, with a thick hilt of rhinoceros or buffalo horn, had a peculiarly curved sickle blade designed to hit over or around an enemy's shield. The most important piece of a warrior's dress was the *lemb*, a lion skin lined with scarlet cloth; however, because there were considerably fewer lions in Ethiopia than brave sons of the country, the *lemb* was made of fabric in most cases, cut in the shape of a skin, with two trefoil shaped flaps hanging down in front representing the lion's paws. Chieftains wore a headdress made of a lion's mane.

The Gallas (some of whom are Moslems) were similarly armed with long



spears, round bucklers, and curved sickle swords. They sported a hornlike headdress as decoration in battle.

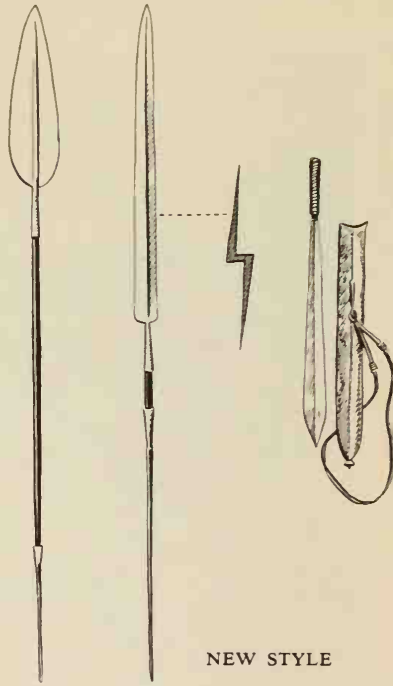
To the south of Ethiopia and on the easternmost hornlike projection of the East coast of Africa live the warlike Somali. Their weapons were mainly spears and shields, as was the case with most tribes of this region. The Somali shields were round and rather small, of very thick leather, shaped with a boss in the center and decorated with geometric designs of punch marks that look somewhat like basket weaving. Interestingly enough, practically identical shields were used in Arabia and Persia, though it is impossible to tell who influenced whom.

The Somali are known as tall men, but the Watusi to the south are even taller; they are easily the tallest people in the world. They are cattle herders; and like most of these aristocratic tribes, they always carry their weapons, as tokens of their manly prowess. Besides spear and bow, they have a long, slender club with a thick, knobby end, which looks very much like a shillelagh. Since a man is practically never seen without his club, it has become an important part of the greeting ceremony. When two men meet, each holds out the knobbed end of his club to be touched by the other as a symbol of peaceful intentions.

The most famous of the warlike herders of East Africa, however, are the Masai. They carry large oval shields of bull hide reinforced by a wooden shield rim and braced by a wooden handle that extends the entire length of the shield. The face of the shield is painted in striking patterns of white, black, and red. These patterns are the emblems of the different clans, somewhat like the coats-of-arms of knightly families in medieval Europe. The spears of the

MASAI WARRIORS
SOMALI WARRIORS

MASAI SPEARS AND SWORDS



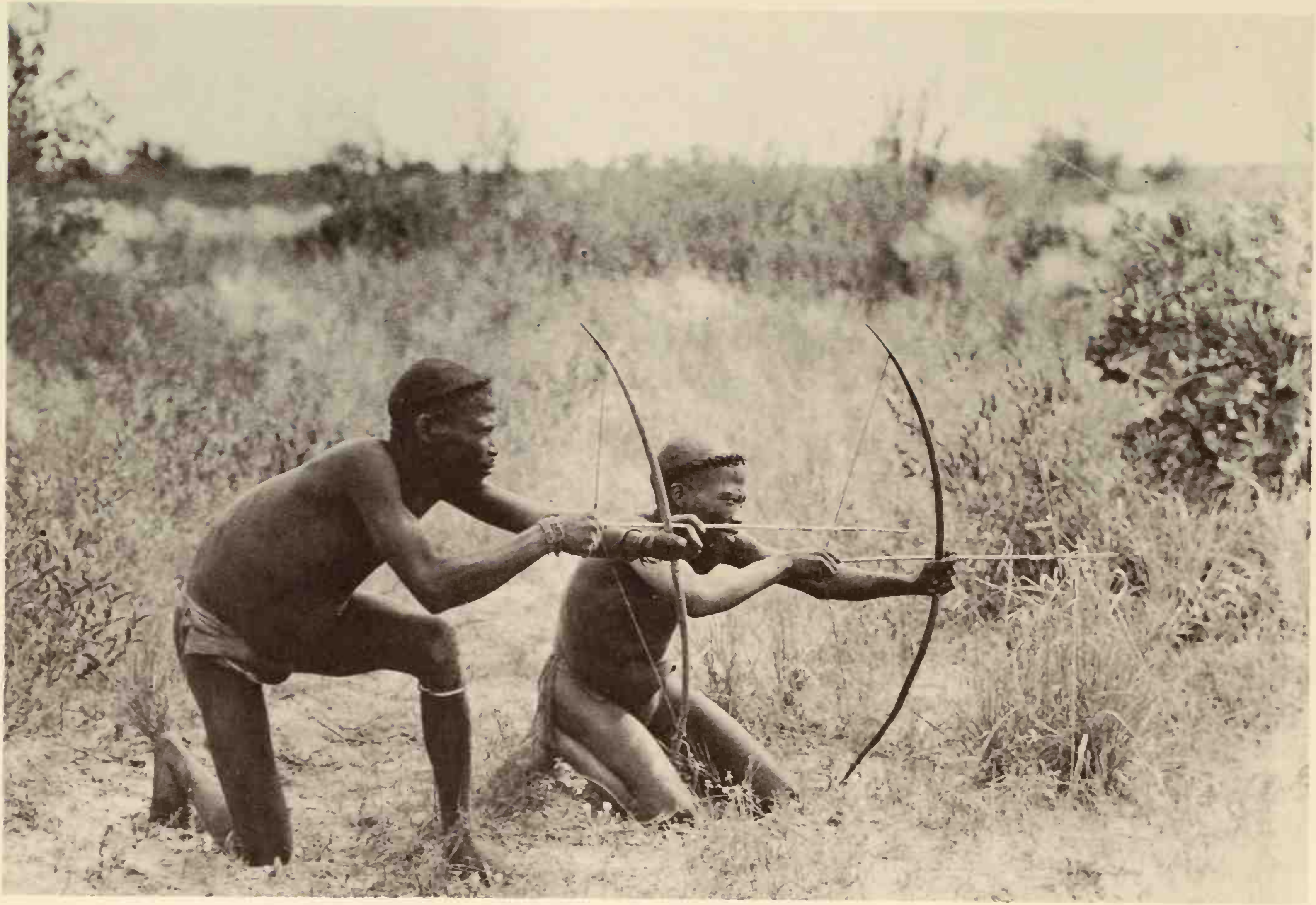
NEW STYLE

OLD STYLE

Masai, too, are of a distinct form that is easily recognizable. Their blades are by far the longest in Africa, and in order to give them the necessary stiffness for an effective thrust, they are forged with a zigzag cross section. This achieves the effect of a stiffening midridge without adding unnecessary weight. To counterbalance the overlong blade, a long iron spearbutt is added to the shaft. In some cases blade and butt have grown so much that they nearly meet in the center and only a few inches of wooden shaft are left as a hand grip. The Masai sword is a poor second to this splendid spear. The sword's leaf-shaped, double-edged blade is fitted into a simple wooden handle without a guard and is carried in a rawhide scabbard in a sling over the shoulder. Distinguished warriors often wear a special headdress of ostrich feathers framing the face.

The shield and spear of the Masai are not only weapons for war, but also for the lion hunt. It is interesting to see evidence on the famous "lion-hunt dagger" found in Mycenae that the ancient Greeks at the time of the Trojan War hunted lions with shield and spear, too. The Mycenaean shield seems to have been of the same construction as the Masai shield. Perhaps the Masai, whose tribal lore claims that they came from the north long ago, have preserved some of the traditions of the ancient Mediterranean culture.

MASAI WARRIORS AT WAR DANCE



BUSHMEN HUNTING

South Africa

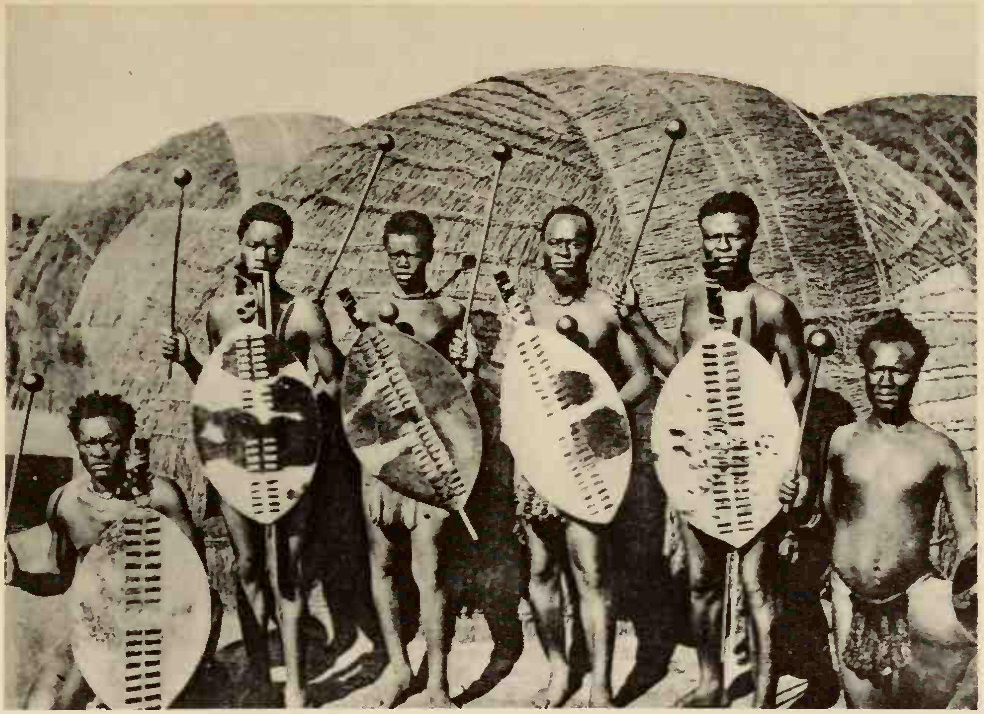
There is archaeological evidence that in prehistoric times a race of smallish men with rather pale yellow-brown skin and curly hair, which grew in tight little tufts, was spread out over the greater part of Africa south of the Sahara. Over the ages they were gradually pushed back and displaced by tall, dark-skinned tribes; at present the small men are to be found in the parched wastelands of the Kalahari Desert in southwest Africa, living the nomadic life of hunters and gatherers. These people are called Bushmen, a word derived from the Dutch "bosjesman," because their desert sleeping shelters are little windbreaks woven of branches that look like "bosjes," shrubbery.

They are somewhat taller than the four and a half foot Pygmies, but in other ways they are much alike. Both are great archers. The arrows of the Bushmen are of peculiar construction—a small triangular head is set into a short rod of hardwood, which in turn is inserted into a reed that forms the arrow's shaft. The arrows are poisoned, but as a safety device the poison is smeared only on the rod, thus making sure that the hunter cannot kill himself accidentally if he cuts himself with the arrow point. The poison is concocted from mashed caterpillars. These poisonous creatures are regarded with religious awe by the Bushmen because of their deadly qualities. As hunters, the Bushmen are superb trackers; and, besides good marksmanship, they have enormous stamina, which enables them to follow a fleeing antelope until the animal collapses from exhaustion. Unfortunately, they seem to have difficulty seeing cattle as anything but particularly stupid game that can be hunted most easily. Therefore, they have brought down on themselves the hate and the persecution of their cattle-owning neighbors, the Bantu and the Boers.

HOTTENTOT WARRIORS

Another lightskinned group of people is the Hottentots. They are somewhat taller but otherwise very much like Bushmen. Though they are herders, they are good hunters, too. Their weapons are the bow and arrow, similar to those of the Bushmen, but as a special weapon, they use the *knobkerrie,* a short throwing club with a thick head. A warrior will carry several of them in his belt and hurl them in rapid succession with deadly accuracy. Efficient as the *knobkerrie* is in bringing down an antelope or gnu, it is powerless, of course, against a rhinoceros or an elephant. These large animals are caught with traps or pitfalls. Herding in the past seemed to lead naturally to cattle-raiding and this to counter-raids and intertribal warfare. Such fighting was done with the *knobkerrie*, too. As defensive weapon the Hottentot warrior carried a longer staff, with which he parried and deflected the clubs hurled at him.

The most bitter enemies of the Hottentots were the Zulus, a Bantu-speaking



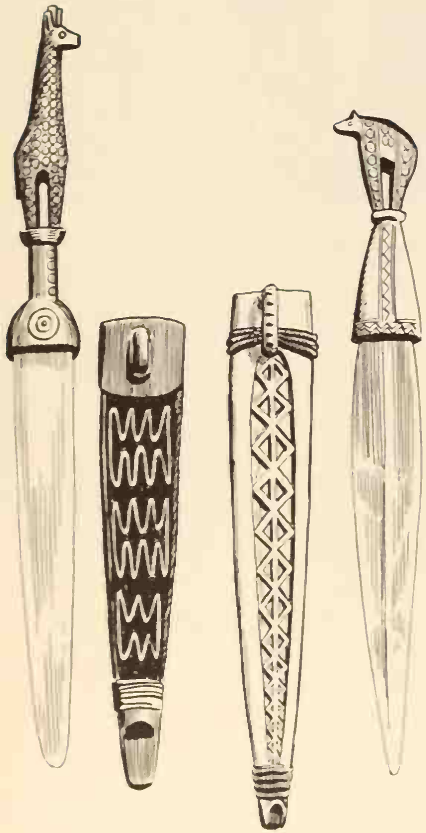
ZULU WARRIORS

people. Being herders and cattle-enthusiasts, they were aggressive enough in their cattle raids; but when a great military leader, Tchaka, organized them, they became one of the greatest powers in South Africa. Originally, Tchaka was only the chieftain of a relatively small tribe—the Amazulu—but he conquered and absorbed about sixty other related tribes. The secret of Tchaka's success was a change in armament and tactics he introduced. His warriors had formerly fought with javelins, *assegais*. Each carried a sheaf of five or six in his left hand, grasped behind a cowhide shield. They fought from a distance, jumping from side to side to avoid enemy missiles and throwing their own *assegais* so rapidly that two or even three were in the air at the same time. Even though they had a special trick of setting the thin shafts of the *assegais* in a quivering, humming motion at the moment of release, which made it more difficult for the enemy to judge the *assegais'* direction, this type

of battle was never really decisive. Tchaka gave his warriors a shorter, sturdier *assegai* with a wide blade fit for thrusting. When the enemy threw their javelins, Tchaka's men ducked behind their large shields, let the volley pass, and rushed in with a determined, deadly "bayonet charge." As a second weapon for close combat, they used a long-handled, ball-headed club of hardwood or rhinoceros horn. The warriors were tightly organized in closely knit companies and regiments. Different units were distinguished by their headdresses and the colors of their cowhide shields.

The shields were reinforced with wide hide strips threaded through closely set slits in the center of the basic cowhide surface. Each shield was stiffened by a stick from top to bottom, topped by a plume made from a wildcat's or leopard's tail. As a mark of distinction, veterans wore a characteristic headring woven into their hair. Numerous neighboring tribes, impressed by the prowess of the Zulu and eager to share his reputation, adopted Zulu dress and weapons.

Other tribes known for their warlike qualities are the Basuto and the Bechuana. The Bechuana were particularly skilled craftsmen who made elaborately barbed *assegais* and beautifully decorated knives.



BECHUANA DAGGERS

North Africa

TUAREGH WARRIOR

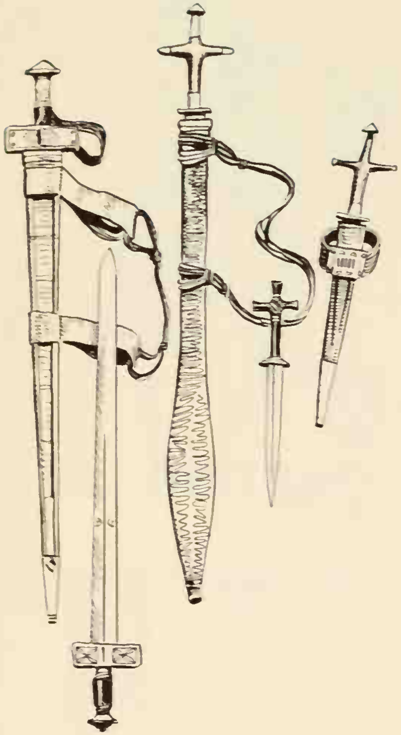
The part of Africa that was known to Europeans from the very beginning of history is the stretch of land that borders the Mediterranean Sea.

Because it is effectively cut off from the rest of Africa by the Sahara Desert, it is entirely different in most aspects. Its population consists of people rather European in appearance; for instance, among the Berbers and Kabyles of Morocco are many individuals with blond hair and blue eyes.

Culturally, North Africa has been somewhat uniform. With the Islamic conquest in the seventh century, it became solidly Moslem in faith and Arabic-speaking in language. Nevertheless, it is, and has been, separated into several political units—Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco—each with a long and involved history of its own.

There are several nomadic tribes, however, that have been independent of these states until relatively modern times. The most famous are the Tuaregh of the Sahara Desert, also known as the "Blue Men" because of their voluminous robes of indigo blue that stain the skin (the stain cannot be removed be-

cause of a lack of water, and is considered to be a mark of elegance). The Tuaregh have been the scourge of the Sahara, raiding caravans as well as the surrounding settlements on their swift dromedaries. Their typical weapons are straight longswords—many of them with European medieval blades—with cruciform hilts or, depending on the region, with cruciform pommels. As protective arms they use large antelope hide shields painted with strangely cruciform designs. Since the cross shape is abhorred by all other Moslems, the Tuaregh have been romantically suspected of being the descendants of crusaders.

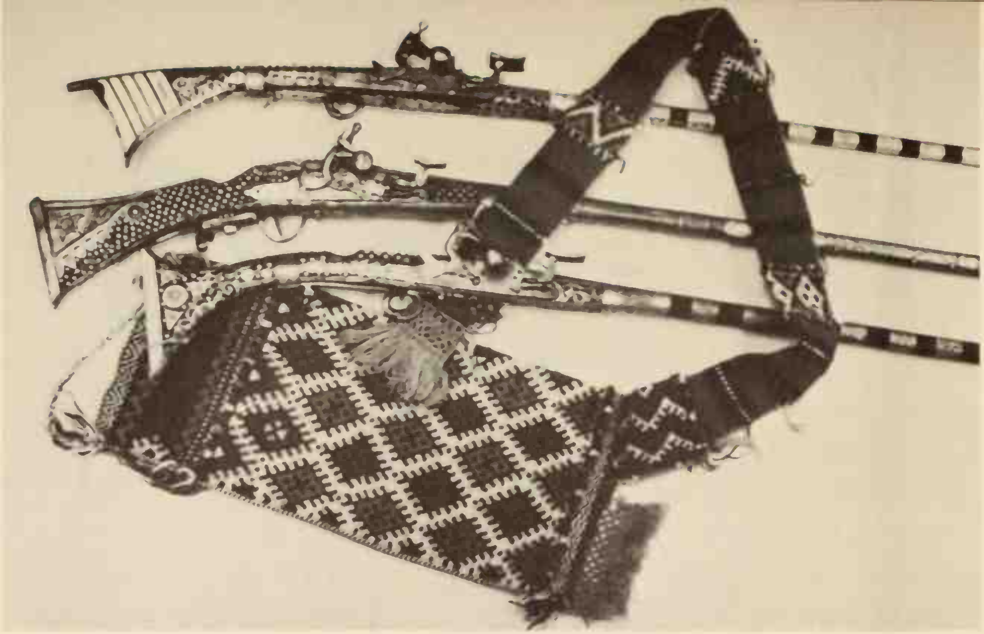


TUAREGH SWORDS AND DAGGERS

In the eastern Sahara roam the Tibbu, old enemies of the Tuaregh because they habitually raided the Tibbu's herds and salt markets. The Tibbu costume is similar to that of the Tuaregh, including a veil in front of the men's faces, but they do not insist on wearing blue exclusively. The Tibbu are more horsemen than camel riders. As weapons, they wear a pair of light javelins with very thin shafts. These they throw with a special twist that makes them spin like rifle bullets, a practice that greatly improves their accuracy. Furthermore, they have throwing irons, short curved swords, and the same bracelet-daggers that the Haussa and Tuaregh wear.

The people of the Barbary coast—the African shore of the Mediterranean Sea—and especially the men of Algeria and Tunisia, were once dreaded as ruthless pirates and slavers who raided the coasts of Italy, France, and Spain for centuries. After many futile attempts to stop these pirates—even the United States had its Barbary Pirates War in 1801–05 and Algerian War in 1815–16—the French finally succeeded. In the middle of the nineteenth century, they conquered Algeria and held it for about one hundred years. The French troops sent there to fight and later stationed in the country adopted the local dress as more suited for the hot climate than their European uniforms. This colonial infantry was called *Zouaves,* and their colorful outfit became the fa-

ZOUAVES AND SPAHI (HORSEMEN)



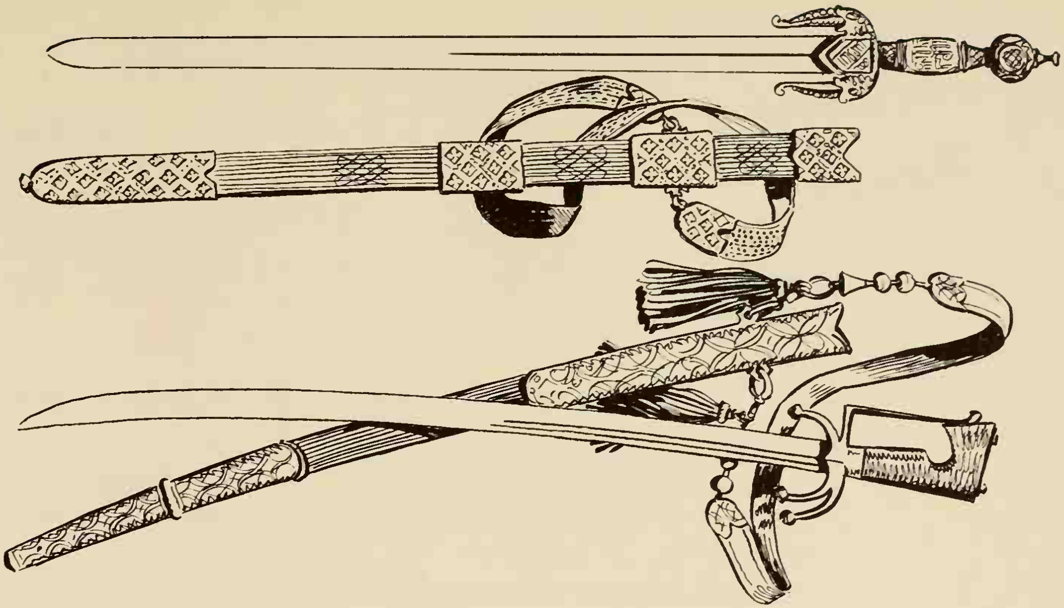
BERBER AND KABYLE GUNS AND GUN COVER

vorite model for dashing infantry uniforms. They were particularly popular with the volunteer regiments in America in the early days of the Civil War.

The North Africans were not only impressive as sailors and foot soldiers, but, like the Numidians of Hannibal's days, they were great horsemen. As *Spahi* or African Light Horse, they became an élite corps of the French cavalry. The African influence in the French army went so far that after the conquest of Algeria, a new model of bayonet was introduced that was styled after the *flyssa* of the Algerians.

In Morocco's Rif and Atlas Mountains dwell large groups of non-Arabic, Moslem tribes, the Berbers and Kabyles. They are best known for their long-barreled snaphaunce guns with heavy silver mountings that are prized by all tourists. These guns were once fired in bitter battles against French and Spanish colonialists. Now they are used primarily in *fantasias*, colorful mock battle displays on festive occasions. The different sub-tribes of Berbers each

BERBER TRIBESMEN



MOORISH SWORD AND MOROCCAN SABER

have a distinctive style in the silver decoration and the butt shapes of their guns. As edged weapons, Berbers carry curved daggers in brass or silver mounted scabbards, and sabres with strangely shaped (but actually very comfortable) hilts. The down-curved quillons of these sabres are reminiscent of the sword hilts of their ancestors, the Moors of the early Middle Ages who conquered much of Spain. The old Moorish sword was straight and double-edged like all ancient African sword types, and it was used together with the *adarga*, a large leather shield of double-oval form that apparently is related to the shield forms of the Tuaregh and some Sudanese tribes. The *adarga* was strong and light at the same time. The Spaniards took it over from the Moors during the centuries-long struggle for Spain. When the *conquistadores* landed in the New World, each had on his shield arm an *adarga*—probably the first piece of African culture introduced in America.

MOORISH HORSEMEN AFTER A MEDIEVAL SPANISH MANUSCRIPT

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PAGE 45
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PAGE 50
Berber and Kabyle guns and gun cover: Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

PAGE 51
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Index

Adarga, 53
Algeria, 47, 48
Amazons, 14
Amhars, 36
Arabs, 8
Arrows
  poisoned, 33, 43
Arrowheads, 33, 43
Ashanti, 16
Assegai, 45–6
Axes, 28
  battle-axe, 5
  cleaver, 3
  hand axe, 3
  tang, 3, 28
Azande (Niam-Naim), 24

Baggara tribe, 27
Baghirmi tribe, 20
Baldrics, 17
Bantu tribe, 28, 43
Basuto tribe, 46
Battle-axe, 5
Bechuana tribe, 46
Benin, 10
Berbers, 47, 50, 53
Body armor
  breastplates, 23
  lemb, 37
  mail shirts, 20, 26
  quilted coats, 26
  quilted jackets, 20
  quilted ponchos, 12
Boers, 43
Bornu tribe, 20
Bows, 12, 17, 33, 39
  bows and arrows, 12, 33, 44
  crossbows, 34
Bracelet-daggers, 18, 48
Bushmen, 43, 44

Carthage, 7
Chanfrons, 20
Chariots, 5, 27
Cleaver, 3
Clubs, 17, 39
  hardwood, 46
  knobkerrie, 44
  rhinoceros horn, 46
  wooden, 25
Congo, 28–35
Crossbow, 34
Daggers, 5, 53
  bracelet-daggers, 18, 48
Dahomey, 14
Dinka tribe, 25

Egypt, 4, 47
Ethiopia, 36, 37, 39

Fang tribe, 34
Flyssa, 50

Gabon, 34
Gallas, 36, 37
Ghana, 17
Guns, 14, 15
  snaphaunce, 50

Hand axe, 3
Haussa tribe, 18, 26, 48
Headdress
  horn, 39
  lion's mane, 37
  ostrich feather, 41
Helmets
  basketwork, 12
  bucket, 20

crocodile skin, 12
iron, 20
padded, 20, 23
plumed, 20
round, 26
Hottentots, 44
Hyksos, 5

Javelins, 45, 48
assegai, 45–6

Kabyles, 47, 50
Kalahari Desert, 43
Knives, 23, 30, 46
flyssa, 50
Knobkerrie, 44

Lances, 17
Lemb, 37
Libya, 47

Mail
Sudanese, 20, 26
Mamelukes, 9
Mandingo tribe, 17
Mangbetu tribe, 23
Masai tribe, 39, 41
Melli, 17
Morocco, 47, 50
Moslems, 17, 47, 48, 50
Mossi tribe, 18

Niger River, 17
Nubians, 5, 27
Nuer tribe, 25
Numidians, 50

Oxen, 27

Pygmies, 33, 34, 43

Sabres, 53
Sahara Desert, 4, 7, 17, 47
Scabbards, 12, 41, 53
Schuli tribe, 25
Shields, 4, 11, 23, 41
adarga, 53
antelope hide, 48
basketwork, 30
buffalo hide, 37
bull hide, 39
circular, 37, 39
cowhide, 45, 46
elephant hide, 25
hippopotamus hide, 25, 26
leather, 39
oval, 25, 39
ox hide, 4, 25
Shilluk tribe, 25
Snaphaunce gun, 50
Somali tribe, 39
Soso tribe, 17
South Africa, 43–6
Spahi, 50
Spears, 12, 25, 28, 33, 34, 37, 39, 41
long, 39
poisoned, 33
spearheads, 5, 30
Sudan, 17–27
Swords, 12, 17, 18, 30, 41, 48
blades, 37, 39, 41
hilts, 37
Cruciform, 18, 20, 26, 48
pommels, 48
sabres, 53

Tang, 3, 28
Tchaka, 45–6
Throwing irons, 23, 28, 30, 34, 48
Tibbu, 48
Tirailleurs de Senegal, 16
Traps, 34
Tuaregh ("Blue Men"), 7, 47, 48
Tunisia, 47, 48

Watusi, 39

Zouaves, 48
Zulus, 45–6

Helmut Nickel grew up in Dresden, Germany, where his favorite haunts as a boy were the local zoo, and the "Rüstkammer," the famous armory of the Kings of Saxony. For a long time he was undecided whether to become a zoologist or an art historian, but finally art history won, when he enrolled in the Free University in Berlin. There his interest in American Indians and other early peoples led him to take courses in Ethnology and Pre-Columbian Art; he even went so far as to try to learn Aztec. As a student in Berlin, he made his living illustrating children's books and historical and science fiction in boys' magazines. After receiving his Ph.D. for a thesis about the development of the knightly shield during the Middle Ages, he worked at the Berlin Museum, and in 1960 came to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, where he is now Curator of Arms and Armor.

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